

# Northumbria Research Link

Citation: Somerville, Susan, Cooper, Christina, Wilmot, Sarah, Dalkin, Sonia and Lhussier, Monique (2016) Operationalisation of realist synthesis as a PhD student; what works, for whom, and in what circumstances? In: Centre for the Advancement of Realist Evaluation and Synthesis (CARES) 2016, 03 - 05 Oct 2016, London, UK.

URL:

This version was downloaded from Northumbria Research Link:  
<http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/28001/>

Northumbria University has developed Northumbria Research Link (NRL) to enable users to access the University's research output. Copyright © and moral rights for items on NRL are retained by the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. Single copies of full items can be reproduced, displayed or performed, and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided the authors, title and full bibliographic details are given, as well as a hyperlink and/or URL to the original metadata page. The content must not be changed in any way. Full items must not be sold commercially in any format or medium without formal permission of the copyright holder. The full policy is available online: <http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/policies.html>

This document may differ from the final, published version of the research and has been made available online in accordance with publisher policies. To read and/or cite from the published version of the research, please visit the publisher's website (a subscription may be required.)



**Northumbria  
University**  
NEWCASTLE



**UniversityLibrary**

# Operationalisation of realist synthesis as a PhD student; what works, for whom, and in what circumstances?

Susan Somerville<sup>1</sup>, Christina Cooper<sup>2</sup>, Sarah Wilmot<sup>2</sup>, Sonia Dalkin<sup>2</sup>, Monique Lhussier<sup>2</sup>  
<sup>1</sup>NHS Education for Scotland; <sup>2</sup>Northumbria University

## INTRODUCTION

Operationalisation of realist methods can be challenging (Dalkin et al., 2015). Protocols and standards exist in the literature to guide the process of realist informed research (Greenhalgh et al., 2011, 2015; Rycroft Malone et al., 2012; Saul et al., 2013; Blane et al., 2015). Realist methodologies are advocated for the exploration of complex interventions, in a variety of subject areas and the application of these protocols and standards is likely to require individually tailored approaches. This heterogeneity is challenging for realist novices, especially those who find themselves working on research as doctoral students, and so much more than is the norm in realist research.

## OBJECTIVE

This poster illustrates the various approaches taken by three doctoral students applying realist methodologies as part of a PhD.

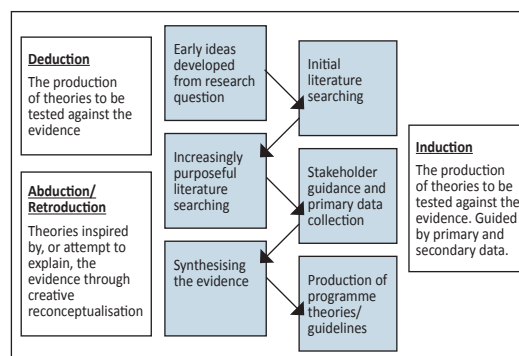
## METHODOLOGY

### Project 1: Susan Somerville



The mobile clinical skills and simulation facility was unique in the UK at the time of its launch (2009), and is now the subject of this PhD. Published literature is very limited regarding mobile simulation, so grey literature, field trips and stakeholder interviews are the sources of data endorsed as part of a realist synthesis. The realisation that the collection and analysis of such data for theorizing was validating and was pivotal in my developing understanding. This PhD was originally designed to be sequential; a realist synthesis which would inform a realist evaluation. The sequence and weighting of this 2-part study is generating much reflecting, reasoning, mediating and judgement within this team of student and supervisors, none of whom are experienced realists.

### Project 2: Christina Cooper



As a PhD student new to both realist methods, and the subject area, prevention of risk behaviour in adolescents, a large amount of time was spent submerged in the literature. Unfamiliarity with the specifics of the subject impacted on both retroductive theorizing, and application to ethics in order to carry out consultations with key stakeholders. A key issue in this was reaching an agreement on when consultation becomes primary data in relation to research governance. Addressing and resolving methodological issues is an ongoing process.

### Project 3: Sarah Wilmot



Saul et al's (2013) protocol for a rapid realist review (RRR) suggests a composition of essential team members. My RRR was undertaken as part of a PhD, therefore, instead of engaging a local reference group and expert panel throughout the RRR as Saul et al. (2013) suggest, guidance was sought from the PhD supervision team, who have a breadth of knowledge of care planning and realist methodology and thus fulfil the role of the local reference group and expert panel.

## DISCUSSION

Looking for a realist recipe is a natural yearning as a PhD student who is unfamiliar or uncertain about using this methodology. Three PhD students have undertaken different approaches to their realist studies modifying the standards, protocols and methods to find a bespoke way to explore their respective, unique and complex interventions with a realist lens. The acceptance of uncertainty and the importance of theorizing from a plethora of sources is fundamental for realist doctoral students.

## REFERENCES

- Blane, D.N., Macdonald, S., Morrison, D. and O'Donnell, C.A., 2015. Interventions targeted at primary care practitioners to improve the identification and referral of patients with co-morbid obesity: a realist review protocol. *Systematic reviews*, 4(1), p.1.
- Dalkin S., 2015, personal communication.
- Greenhalgh, T., Wong, G., Westhorp, G. and Pawson, R., 2011. Protocol-realist and meta-narrative evidence synthesis: evolving standards (RAMESES). *BMC medical research methodology*, 11(1), p.115.
- Greenhalgh, T., Wong, G., Jagosh, J., Greenhalgh, J., Manzano, A., Westhorp, G. and Pawson, R., 2015. Protocol—the RAMESES II study: developing guidance and reporting standards for realist evaluation. *BMJ open*, 5(8), p.e008567.
- Rycroft-Malone, J., McCormack, B., Hutchinson, A.M., DeCorby, K., Bucknall, T.K., Kent, B., Schultz, A., Snelgrove-Clarke, E., Stetler, C.B., Titler, M. and Wallin, L., 2012. Realist synthesis: illustrating the method for implementation research. *Implementation Science*, 7(1), p.1.
- Saul, J.E., Willis, C.D., Bitz, J. and Best, A., 2013. A time-responsive tool for informing policy making: rapid realist review. *Implementation Science*, 8(1), p.1.